



IUF : UNITING FOOD, FARM & HOTEL WORKERS WORLDWIDE

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IUF COVID-19 DEMANDS : MEAT + POULTRY PROCESSING

Meat and poultry processing facilities have been 'hotspots' for the spread of SARS-CoV-2. By the end of August 2020, in the United States alone, 39,000 meat and poultry processing workers were infected by the coronavirus and at least 170 had died from the COVID-19 disease.

This occupational safety and health crisis requires a collective and universal response.

After tracking outbreaks around the world in meat and poultry processing and seeking the advice of workers, their unions and public health specialists, we are today much clearer about what is causing the outbreaks and the safety measures required to protect workers in these industries.

WHY DOES THE CORONAVIRUS SPREAD IN MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSING?

Work is organized in the 'Fordist' model developed for the automobile assembly line. In the case of meat processing it is a production line designed to efficiently disassemble an animal into food. The 'efficient' model of production for employers poses serious health and safety hazards for workers. Throughput and profits are increased by running the lines as fast as possible but the health and safety risks to workers of increasing production and driving down costs by this method are unacceptable. The current pandemic combines a risk of infection by a serious illness with other well documented occupational health risks such as repetitive strain injuries and contracting antimicrobial resistant (AMR) pathogens.

The pace of the line demands that workers work in close proximity, standing opposite as well as alongside each



other, and increasing the risk of infection. The workplace is crowded not only at the workstation but also in locker rooms, bathrooms and in cafeterias. Workers travel to and from work together in cars, buses and vans. The coronavirus appears to spread easily when people gather together in enclosed spaces with cooler temperatures and poor ventilation.

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SAFETY AT WORK

- All workplaces need a risk assessment plan and must develop protocols for minimizing the risk of workers being infected with COVID-19. The planning and protocols should be jointly agreed between the management and the union.
- The agreed protocols should be distributed widely and posted on noticeboards in languages that all workers can understand. Communication should be consistent and regular.
- The risk assessment must include a hazard identification process. The goal should be to eliminate the spread of the virus in the workplace and to guard against further outbreaks through measures which minimize the risk of the virus spreading.
- Engineering and administration controls are necessary. Engineering controls may include installation of barriers between workers. Such barriers should be fixed perspex, plexiglas or similar material. Doors which open without workers touching any surface with their hands (with or without gloves) are desirable.
- Plenty of hand washing and sanitizer stations should be provided and the number of breaks increased so that hand-washing becomes a routine part of the work and use of restrooms can be staggered.
- Two metre physical distancing (6+ feet) is the recommended standard. The slowing of production lines may be required to achieve this standard.
- Administration controls need to ensure appropriate physical distancing in restrooms, locker rooms, workplace entry points and break rooms.



- Consideration should be given to staggering shift start and finish times and to maintaining the same pool of workers for each shift.
- Regular thorough cleaning and sanitation of the workplace, including restrooms, donning and doffing areas, and lunch rooms is essential. Particular attention should be given to regular sanitation of all shared surfaces such as door handles. Engineering controls that eliminate physical contact with surfaces can restrict the spread of infection.
- Ventilation of the workplace is extremely important. Recent research confirms that the coronavirus is unlikely to be only transmitted by droplets and can live and spread in the air. It also thrives in the cool temperatures maintained in meat and poultry processing plants. Ventilation systems which are fit for purpose and regularly maintained are essential for worker safety.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be the last line of essential defence to protect the worker from infection. Training in donning and doffing techniques is required to protect against contamination while getting ready to begin or leave work. PPE should fit comfortably and be gender sensitive.
- Because of the risk of aerosol transmission of the virus, particularly in environments which are poorly ventilated, the IUF recommends N95 respirators be worn in meat and poultry plants in localities where there is community transmission of the virus. When there is a shortage of these protective devices, supply to workers in health care settings takes precedence. People with chronic respiratory, cardiac, or other medical conditions that make breathing difficult should check with their health care provider before using an N95 respirator. Affiliates should negotiate the introduction and use of N95 devices with employers.

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TRANSPORT AND ACCOMMODATION

- Crowded living conditions and shared transport to and from work can increase the risk of the spread of COVID-19. If accommodation for migrant workers is supplied as part of the work arrangements, this accommodation must be regularly inspected by public health authorities. Physical distancing and sanitation are important protections where workers are accommodated.
- The risks of carpooling need to be identified and managed. Regular internal sanitation of the car, van or bus should be arranged. Masks should be worn while travelling in shared transport.



PROTECTION OF INCOME

- Economic security and good health are interrelated. Policies which discriminate and actions which destroy livelihoods impoverish communities and contribute to injustice and inequality.
- Paid sick leave should be provided for all workers who are absent from work for reasons of sickness or the need to isolate. The payment should be at, or close to, the normal earnings of the worker so that the worker and family are not economically disadvantaged by their absence from the workplace. Workers should not have to choose between the risk of infecting others and impoverishing themselves and their families.
- Paid leave should also be negotiated for those required to care for children during school and child care centre closure or workers should be reimbursed for the cost of alternative child care.
- Vulnerable workers who have underlying health conditions and older workers should be given work that allows them to physically separate from other workers at all times. If this is not possible, isolation with sufficient income support for the period of pandemic danger should be negotiated.
- Bonuses and other financial incentives should not be tied to attendance. It increases the risk of the spread of the virus.
- Protection of income is a public health measure and should be treated as such by regulators.

Testing and Tracing

Temperature screening of workers as they enter the work premises is important but not foolproof. Asymptomatic people and those who have yet to show symptoms can transmit the virus.

Affiliates should work with employers and public health authorities to establish and monitor the testing and tracing of individual workers. There should be comprehensive testing of meat and poultry processing workers during the pandemic. Contact tracing systems should be in place to identify an infected person's contacts so that these people can isolate to reduce risk.

Policies and procedures about when workers should isolate should be clear and apply to all.

SUBCONTRACTING AND OTHER FORMS OF PRECARIOUS WORK

- The exploitation involved in procuring migrant workers through employment agencies and gangmasters has been exposed to a wide audience during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, in many Western European countries, subcontracted workers have no access to their rights, are paid below the legal minimum wage of their host country, are housed in substandard accommodation and are indebted to the agencies which arrange their work.
- Direct permanent employment encourages adherence to safety policies and procedures, and builds commitment to the work, work colleagues and the employer.
- Subcontracted and agency workers have less access to training, are less likely to be provided with appropriate PPE and are more likely to have no basic leave entitlements.
- Direct employment facilitates testing and contact tracing work. Employers hold the appropriate information on their employees to begin successful contact tracing. Agency workers often work at multiple sites and contact details may not be available or may be overlooked during contact tracing procedures.



Additional Resources



IUF-EFFAT

Hungry for fairness: raising standards in the meat sector

<https://effat.org/in-the-spotlight/hungry-for-fairness-raising-standards-in-the-meat-sector/>



THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

- The IUF will campaign with affiliates for safer and healthier workplaces where rights can be accessed and workers are treated with dignity and respect.
- Occupational safety and health measures must be prescribed in a core ILO convention and COVID-19 recognized as an occupational disease.
- Gender equality and the fight against all forms of discrimination are priority goals.
- Workers deemed to be essential in times of crisis must be rewarded with good wages and benefits at all times. This must include universal access to healthcare and paid sick leave.
- The climate crisis and the potential for future pandemics are real and must be prepared for.
- Work to reduce climate and pandemic risk must start now. The IUF and its affiliates will work with legislators and employers for safer workplaces and safer and more harmonious communities.